

GOING THE DISTANCE: A MODEL FOR MEANINGFUL OUTREACH

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Abstract

As the only four-year academic institution in the geographically large and rural state of Wyoming (WY), the University of Wyoming Art Museum (UWAM) was challenged to create meaningful access to the museum and its collection statewide. Launched in 1982, the Ann Simpson Artmobile Program (Artmobile) is a vital outreach component of the UWAM and the University of Wyoming (UW). In this paper, I will discuss how the program is organized and funded as well as recent enhancements that are effectively addressing K-12 curricular support, community access and promotion for the UWAM and UW. I also will indicate how this program may serve as an example or model for other institutions in North America or elsewhere that wish to provide outreach to rural and distant communities.

Established in 1972, the UWAM was created to assemble a collection of original art for UW to support academic programs and enrich the state's cultural environment. Today, the UWAM is housed in the Centennial Complex (Fig. 1) and shares the facility with the American Heritage Center, an archives collection. Both institutions relocated to the new building designed by Antoine Predock in 1993.

The UWAM occupies 50,000 square feet, has 7000 objects in its collections, annually presents 20 exhibitions in-house and has an active K-12 program. Visiting artists and scholars enhance educational opportunities for both the academic community and the public. The UWAM operates with nine full-time staff members: 12-15 interns, work-study students and part-time paid staff; 20 docents; and a National Advisory Board of up to 40 members.

The UWAM's mission is "to collect, preserve, exhibit, and interpret a broad spectrum of visual arts of the highest quality and of national importance for this and future generations" in order to

Support the university's academic mission by promoting education, awareness, and an understanding of the arts and its importance in our culture to students, citizens of Laramie, the populations of WY and visitors to the state and the Mountain Plains region. (University of Wyoming Art Museum 1999)

It is the only museum in the state of WY to embrace the diversity of art of all periods and cultures.

The geography and demographics of WY, which has a population of less than 500,000 people scattered over 97,914 square miles, offer interesting challenges for the state's only university and the UWAM. UW has almost 13,000 students and is located in Laramie, a city in southeastern WY of 27,204 people (U.S. Bureau of Census 2002). Winters are long, and snow may fall from September until early June. Travel is often difficult.

UW's mission identifies the "responsible stewardship of our cultural, historical, and natural

resources" as an essential goal and makes a commitment "to outreach and service that extends our human talent and technological capacity to serve people in our communities, state, nation, and world." The Artmobile is one of UW's premier outreach programs and is the subject of this paper. I will focus on the following aspects of this program:

1. how the program is organized and presented
2. how the program is funded
3. how the program supports K-12 art education
4. how recent enhancements are expanding the UWAM's connection to communities
5. how it promotes the UW and the UWAM

The Artmobile is designed to bring the museum to WY's remotest communities. A specially-equipped van transports an exhibition of original art. The Artmobile curator schedules the program, transports and sets up the exhibition and conducts tours and hands-on activities with students (Fig. 2) and a variety of other constituencies. There is no fee to the hosting institution. Only overnight accommodations for the curator and a secure area for exhibition setup are required.

Composed of about 24 objects, the Artmobile exhibition changes every two years. The current exhibition, *From Beadwork to Bronze: Celebrating Wyoming's Diverse Heritage in Art*, was designed to present diversity not only in terms of WY's often-overlooked multicultural history, but also through a wide range of artistic media, including both historic works from the UWAM collection and those by WY artists. Examples of artwork from WY artists include a pair of beaded moccasins by Eva McAdams, a Shoshone regalia maker from Fort Washakie recognized as a National Heritage Fellow by the National Endowment for the Arts; a drawing about the symbolism of food in Jewish culture by Amy Lynn Davis of Laramie; a vibrant, monochromatic red painting of a horse by John Giarrizzo of Powell; a trilogy of video shorts exploring Indian culture by Pravina Gondalia of Cheyenne; a landscape photograph by Paul Ng of Rock Springs; an

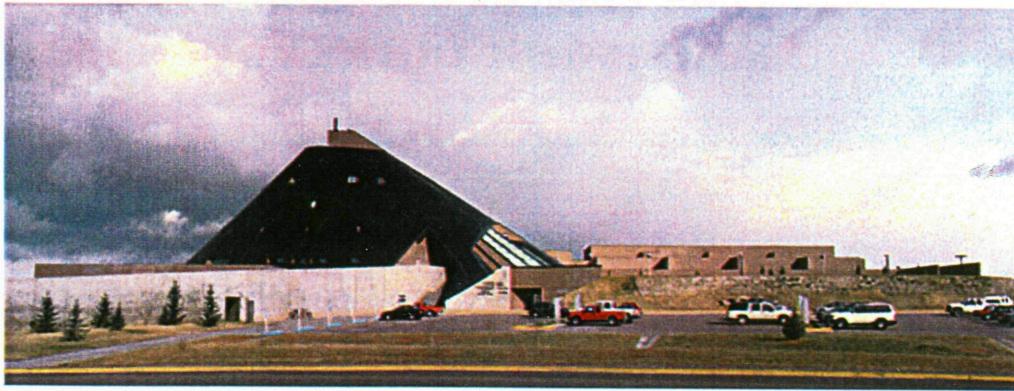


Fig. 1. The University of Wyoming Art Museum. The Centennial Complex houses the University of Wyoming Art Museum and the American Heritage Center. Photograph copyright the University of Wyoming Art Museum, Laramie, WY.

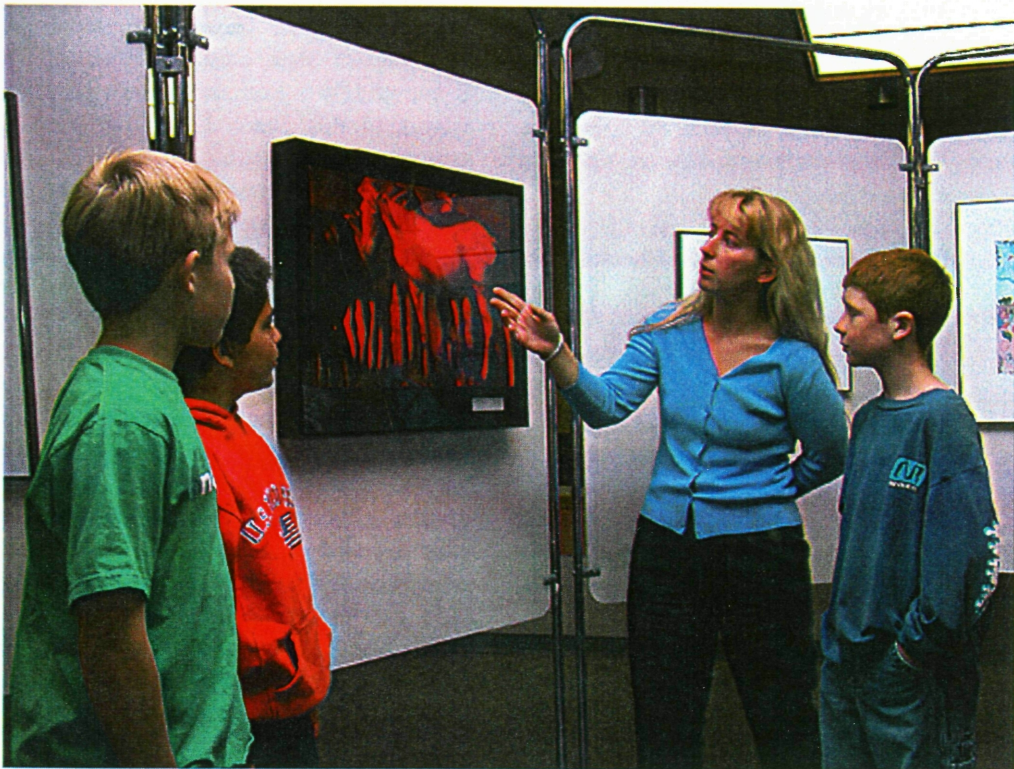


Fig. 2. The Artmobile on location in Powell, WY. Ann Simpson Artmobile Curator Jennifer Durer discusses John Giarrizzo's painting, "Red Desert: Crimson," with students in Powell, WY. Photograph copyright The Powell Tribune, Powell, WY: Toby Bonner, photographer.

ink drawing of bamboo by Sumiko O'Hashi of Laramie; a painting of a buffalo by Ridge Bear of the Wind River Reservation; a color photograph of a migrant worker in Wyoming's beet fields by Devendra Shrikhande of Cody; and a bronze sculpture of a cowboy on horseback by Michael Thomas of Buffalo. Works from the UWAM include a set of Crow leggings for a child; a vintage photograph of an Indian Lodge at Fort Washakie by J.E. Stimson; a photogravure of an Arapaho boy by Edward S. Curtis; and an etching depicting a wagon train on the Oregon Trail by Hans Kleiber.

Participants have responded well to this breadth of media, such as a 6th grade instructor from Casper (pop. 49,644) who said that the

Curator gave us a super orientation on several different art forms. Most of our students hadn't thought of beading and video as art forms. Exposing kids to new experiences opens doors to learning opportunities. (*in litt.* 29.04.2003).

A 2nd grade teacher from Sundance (pop. 1161) also addressed the multidisciplinary nature of the exhibition by commenting that the experience was "very valuable! Many pictures tied in nicely with our quilt patterns we study in second grade. The quilts tie in with patterns in all subject areas and vocabulary" (*in litt.* 29.04.2003). A 5th grade teacher in Powell (pop. 5373) in northwestern WY stated that "the exhibit was an excellent use of classroom time, and I wish we could have more experiences of this type" (*in litt.* 09.09.2003). Including WY artists has also been valuable, as a 2nd grade teacher in Sundance reported: "I enjoyed the fact that all of the artists were from Wyoming. It made it seem a little more likely to [the students] that they could become artists as well" (*in litt.* 29.04.2003).

Since its inception, the Artmobile has served an important role in supporting WY's K-12 curriculum (Fig. 3). Art education in WY's schools varies dramatically. For some, the Artmobile is the only art education opportunity their students have. For others, it enhances existing curriculum. The Artmobile is designed to be flexible to accommodate the needs of hosting schools and serve all grade levels. WY's recently adopted Fine and Performing Art Standards establish a new set of art education guidelines that will be incorporated in the Artmobile and its future use statewide.

In addition to primary and secondary institutions, the Artmobile serves a variety of constituencies, including the Migrant School for children of migrant farm workers, the Wind River Reservation, the Girls and Boys homes, Libraries, the Wyoming Women's Correctional Facility in Lusk and, more recently, state parks and historic sites. Annually, the Artmobile visits 28 venues on average, and more than 5000 students, residents and tourists participate.

The Artmobile regularly monitors feedback through written evaluations distributed at each location visited, as well as onsite and follow-up conversations

with participants. Valuable information is gained from students, art teachers, classroom teachers, principals, superintendents, librarians, state park staff and others, depending on whether the venue was a school, library, state park visitor center, senior center or other location. Because of the ever-changing nature of the audience, which can vary widely during the course of a single day, evaluations are a critical means of improving the Artmobile, especially in terms of adjusting presentations and hands-on activities to serve the needs of each audience.

A recent evaluation from a 6th grade classroom teacher in Sundance, which is located in the northeastern part of WY, supports the goal at the core of the program to bring art to audiences who otherwise would not be able to see museum-quality works of art:

It is wonderful to have "culture" brought to our corner of the state! The students enjoyed the last Artmobile visit and were excited to go to this one. They were not disappointed. (*in litt.* 29.04.2003)

A 1st grade teacher from Casper responded to whether the experience was worthwhile for her and her students by stating: "Yes—a good experience to be exposed to any kind of art" (*in litt.* 15.04.2003).

The Artmobile operates on an annual budget of \$30,000. Historically, the vehicle is replaced every ten years. In 2003, a new van was purchased through funding from the McMurtry Foundation and FMC Corporation. The program is funded by private contributions, the WY Arts Council Underserved Grant and by funds generated from the Artmobile Endowment and the Julianne Michel Foundation.

In 2003, the Artmobile took on a new initiative of "bringing art to communities." Evening open houses for the public, hosted by a museum board member, the UW Outreach School or a local business, now often occur in conjunction with the schedule. Parents and the public are invited to a reception to visit and tour the exhibition with the curator. We also have incorporated the Artmobile into statewide receptions that promote the UW and the UWAM. Hosted by a board member or other friend of the UWAM and generally held in a private home, a brief program is presented and the UW's President or Vice President of Academic Affairs often participates.

In conclusion, the Artmobile is a proven outreach program that effectively engages our statewide, geographically-distant communities. Its distinctive qualities are that a museum educator is onsite with the exhibition; the program can be tailored specifically to the host venue; the cost to the host is minimal; and it is an effective promotional tool for the UWAM and UW. The Artmobile addresses needs that arise from features of WY, such as a large geographical expanse, isolated communities and limited access to museums—factors that are very applicable to other states and countries around the world. The potential for meaningful and



Fig. 3. The Artmobile on location in Powell, WY. Students in Powell, WY, discuss Martin Saldana's colorful naïve painting, "Fish." Photograph copyright The Powell Tribune, Powell, WY: Toby Bonner, photographer.

relevant experiences for rural populations makes the Artmobile an ideal model for other institutions with similar geographical situations and audience constituencies. In its galleries in Laramie, the UWAM presents objects from around the world, and the Artmobile in turn brings that world to the rest of WY.

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